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ABSTRACT

Reviewed are literature and research on the use of the positive peer culture (PPC) approach with socially maladjusted and/or emotionally disturbed adolescents. Studies presented focus on the effects of PPC on inappropriate behavior and parole performance. Findings are noted to be inconclusive. (SB)

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Positive Peer Culture - An Alternative Treatment for the Disturbed and/or Disturbing Adolescent

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Positive Peer Culture - An Alternative Treatment for the Disturbed and/or Disturbing Adolescent

Positive Peer Culture (PPC) was developed for use with adolescents at Highfields, New Jersey, in the late 1950's (Bixby, Elias, & McCorkle, 1958). This group approach stressed that interchange between people in a group could influence individual attitude and outlook. It assumed the delinquent or disturbed adolescent could benefit from a social experience where, in concert with his peers and group leader, he could freely discuss, examine, and understand the problems of living without the threats that had been so common previously. PPC is based upon the philosophy that socially malajusted adolescents, with appropriate treatment, are capable of realistically appraising their true life situations and making reasonable decisions based on that appraisal. The development of mutual concern, "esprit de corps," and group work are distinct entities within PPC. PPC can produce a strong group culture which helps its members to face personal shortcomings and deal with situations which will arise later in the open community and allows human beings to demonstrate genuine concern for one another (Brendtro & Vorrath, 1971).

Peer relationships develop through examination of one's own behavior in relation to the reactions of others in an atmosphere where group intent is to help, not hurt. When a young person helps one of his peers, he builds and develops feelings of self-worth, good self-image, and a worthwhile feeling within himself.

The socially maladjusted and/or emotionally disturbed adolescent responds most to pressures placed upon them by their peers, whether the pressures be positive or negative. What is necessary is to place the youth in a culture which stresses positive and helping concepts. The youth from the sub-culture, for the most part, has never found himself in a situation where positive helping behavior is encouraged or rewarded.

Value changes are initiated by a need to change due to discomfort with one's present pattern of behavior. Adolescents often feel their lives will never hold anything better; thus, they do not even consider altering their present mode of behavior. This initial lack of motivation is overcome by asking adolescents to "do things to help one another." This need eventually becomes the dynamic force in PPC groups and is maintained through constant indirect pressures. For example, if a group member has little self-control and avoids stressful situations by running away, his group must accept responsibility for preventing his flight (Brendtro & Vorrath, 1971).

The philosophical base for PPC was derived from several domains. However, it is of contemporary derivation. Traditional psychotherapeutic methods are excluded. The cognizance of group dynamics is related to the psychodynamic model (Redl, 1966). The positive nature is at least indirectly related to principles of Rogerian therapy (Rogers, 1961).

Harry Vorrath was the founder of the modality. Supporters of PPC report an increase in facilities which subscribe to their philosophy. However, except for five research projects, reports which were available had no reflection upon PPC, but gave information which related to

number admitted, number released, and other administrative statistics which may or may not be related to the treatment provided.

The Michigan Department of Social Services (1975) has reported research results from four Training Schools. Institutional records showed significant gains in self-esteem and marked reductiona in truancies. On the negative side, problems arose with increasing length-of-stay.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections (1969, 1974) has completed objective analysis of the effect of PPC upon adolescent delinquents. The Red-Wing Training School was a facility of the Minnesota Department of Corrections. The first analysis of the PPC treatment program dealt with 242 boys released from Red-Wing in 1969. Both studies were more concerned with parole performance than behavioral change during treatment. The findings of the second study were most significant. The parole performance of 336 boys released from this Training School in 1970 were followed through March 31, 1973, with length of follow up ranging from 27 to 39 months. A total of 256 parolees were followed in 1971 for 15 to 27 months. The final group of paroled males totaled 253. That was in 1972, and they were followed from 3 to 15 months.

As of March 31, 1973, 63.5 percent of the total group paroled in 1970 retained their paroled status, while 37.5 percent had their parole revoked. Of those released during 1971, 76.6 percent retained parole status while 22 percent were revoked. The last group released in 1972 had a retained parole rate of 77.6 percent while revocation of parole accounted for 22.1 percent. In summary, figures for the three year period showed 71.4 percent (603 boys) not revoked and 28.6 percent (242 boys) revoked. Previous to that study, the revocation rate

approximated 50 percent (Brendtro & Vorrath, 1974).

Gerrard (1975) completed a followup study comparing the effect of a PPC program and a behavior modification on boys leaving the Nebraska Boys Youth Development Center at Kearney, Nebrasks. His research sample included all boys released from December 1, 1974 through July 31, 1975. The followup study compared the parole progress from the time of release from the institution until November 3, 1975.

The results of this investigation showed boys coming out of the Behavior Modification Unit to have a much higher percentage of parole revokation (42.5%) than the boys from PPC (14.3%). The preceeding percentages are impressive. However, the research design was not well controlled. Therefore, the results, even though impressive, must be considered with discrimination.

Lybarger (1976) investigated the effect of PPC on the self-concept and rate of exhibition of inappropriate behavior of the emotionally disturbed and/or disturbing male adolescent. In this study, subjects were grouped according to length of time in treatment and statistical analysis was completed on data obtained through a pre-post test design. The results of this research showed PPC to not have a significant positive effect ($p < .05$) on self-concept until the subject had been in treatment approximately 120 days. The study of change in rate of exhibition of inappropriate behavior was surprising. There was an increase in exhibition of inappropriate behavior for 71 percent of the subjects. This increase was significant ($p < .05$) for subjects pre and post tested on their ninty fourth and one hundred thirty fourth day of treatment. These results are not conclusive in terms of approval or lack of approval for PPC. Lybarger's results do raise questions related

to what happens to subjects while surrounded by PPC.

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